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*The influence of piety on the public good.*

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P R E A C H E D I N

The High Church of EDINBURGH,

May 31. 1761,

Before his GRACE

CHARLES LORD CATHCART,

The Lord High Commissioner to the General Assembly of the Church of SCOTLAND.

By ALEXANDER GERARD, M.A.

Professor of Divinity in the Marischal college of Aberdeen.

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ST. R. M. O. N.

The High Church of London

Before his Grace  
CHARLES LORD OF LANCASHIRE

The Lord High Chancellor of Great Britain  
and Lord of the High Court of Chancery

BY ALEXANDER STEADMAN

Printer of Divinity in the Marshfield College

EDINBURGH

Printed at the Edinburgh Press

# A S E R M O N.

DEUT. vi. 24.

— *To fear the Lord our God, for our good  
always.*

**O**NE age is distinguished from another by no circumstance more remarkably, than by the particular vices which are predominant, and the particular virtues which are unfashionable in it. There is no vice which marks the character of the present age more strongly than irreligion. Piety is very generally disregarded, or allowed to have only a small degree of worth; the most unaffected expressions of it are studiously avoided by many, and professedly ridiculed by some. Yet the most natural sentiments of the human heart proclaim, in very intelligible language, that piety is the first and noblest of the virtues, and has a peculiar prerogative above all the rest. We are urged

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ged to the practice of some virtues by our strong sense of their inviolable obligation : we are allured to the love of other virtues by the high approbation of their excellence, which rises in every well-disposed mind. But piety is equally enforced by both these sentiments. Its obligation is indispensable, and its excellence is supreme : it is at once our strict duty, and the greatest glory of human characters. It has thus a witness of its singular dignity in the breast of every man.

It is not difficult to discover the causes of that perversion of sentiment, which has sunk piety so far below its genuine rank, in the opinion of the present generation. It is more difficult to find a remedy for this base perversion. It is doubtless, however, worth while to try every method which is likely to have any force. This generation of men lay claim to a great degree of public spirit, and desire to be thought deeply concerned for the interests of society : will it then be unallowable, on this occasion, to address that generous concern for the public good, which



which *all* profess to entertain, in favour of piety, which *some* despise, and *many* totally neglect? Were a person to attempt erecting piety at once on its genuine foundation, many would think the attempt unworthy of their notice. Were we to insist on the obligation and propriety of paying some regard to infinite perfection; were we to represent the excellence of a temper which implies the love of goodness, and the soundness of the whole constitution of the soul; were we to display the refined joys which are inseparable from the exercise of devout affections, or to speak of the eternal happiness with which God will *reward them that diligently seek him* \*; our arguments might, perhaps, be addressed to principles of the human mind which many pretend not to possess. But when we propose to show, that true piety has the strongest tendency to promote the public interests of society, we bespeak a principle of action which none would willingly be thought to want; we may reasonably expect

\* Heb. xi. 6.

a favourable hearing from all who have truly public spirit : and if this principle, or any other principle, should bring men once to regard piety without prejudice, they would soon be captivated with its native charms, and become solicitous to cultivate it in their hearts.

IN the text, *Moses* informs the people of *Israel*, that *the Lord* commanded them to fear *the Lord* their God, for their good always, for their national prosperity. The republic of *Israel* was a theocracy, a polity under the immediate protection of *Jehovah*; who governed it by a special providence, and was, in a peculiar sense, the king of this people. But it was not only on this account that piety was conducive to their national prosperity; it is in its own nature unchangeably conducive to the happiness of every nation. We may exhort every people under heaven to fear the Lord for their good.

To fear the Lord, is to be truly pious and religious. In the place of religion men substitute, sometimes idle superstition, consisting

in groundless terrors, and solicitude about things indifferent; and sometimes bold enthusiasm, implying unaccountable and unmeaning fervour. But true piety is distinct from both. It is founded on just sentiments of the nature and perfections of God, derived both from his works and from his word, and cherished and rendered habitually present to the mind by frequent meditation. It is a temper compounded of reverence, love, gratitude, and submission, towards the greatest and the best of beings, prevailing habitually in the soul, and expressed in sincere and regular devotion. The Christian religion represents the character of God as in the highest degree worthy of all our pious regards, by assuring us that he is *God our saviour*\*, by informing us of the stupendous dispensation of grace for the redemption of the apostate world, which he has carried on. It therefore requires these regards, raised to the greatest purity and ardor, and exerted in the most spiritual exercises of worship, addressed to God in the

\* Tit. iii. 4.



name of Jesus Christ, and animated by the influences of the Holy Spirit.

SUCH is Christian piety, which, it is our design to prove, has the strongest tendency to promote the public interests of civil society: And after having proved this, we shall show what influence the consideration of it ought to have on all ranks of men.

*First*, WE shall prove, that piety has the strongest tendency to promote the public interests of civil society.

THE great end of religion, doubtless, is to fit men for eternity: but it likewise fits them for all the duties of the present life. The present and the future state of human beings are two parts of the same whole. We can be rendered happy in the latter only by being useful in the former. To employ an appearance of religion as a means of accomplishing secular designs, is a base prostitution of religion: but religion sincerely embraced and steadily adhered to for its own sake, will be the most powerful instrument

ment of promoting every real worldly interest. While it seems to aim directly only at rendering the person who practises it virtuous and happy, it spreads peace and felicity through society. The influence of religion on the peace and order of the world is so conspicuous, that its enemies have affected to represent it as a mere contrivance of politicians for preserving peace and order. From its acknowledged *usefulness*, they have attempted to raise an hypothesis for overturning its *truth*. It has been often proved, that the attempt is vain, and the hypothesis absurd; but the attempt could not have been made, if the singular usefulness of religion in society had not been obvious and undeniable.

THERE is reason to doubt, whether a society could at all subsist for any considerable time, if its members were generally destitute of all religious impressions. If we examine the state of the most barbarous nations, we shall find, that their peace and order result, in a great measure, from some religious sentiments, however imperfect,  
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the want of which could not be supplied by any other principle. Were it possible to eradicate all sense of religion from the minds of men, scarce any thing would be left on which human laws could take hold. When men have any regard to God, the supreme governor of the world, they will *be subject to the powers that are ordained of God, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake* \*. But when they cease to regard rulers as *the ministers of God* †, there can be no longer any subjection to their laws for conscience sake; wrath is the only remaining motive to subjection; and even this motive will be greatly weakened. The severest sanctions can have little influence on those who have no sense of God, or of a future state. How inconsiderable is the force of capital punishments, when men regard death as only a transient pain, the end of all trouble and calamity? Can a person have a degree of resolution sufficient to qualify him for doing any important service to mankind, who would be restrained by the

\* Rom. xiii. 1. 5.

† Verse 4.



fear of death, if he considered it only in this light? The religion of *Japan* proposes no future state of rewards and punishments. There despotic government, ever cruel, ever horrid, has surpassed itself in cruelty. Every law is enacted with unparalleled severity, and executed with shocking barbarity. Yet the laws are despised, and discover their impotence most, when they attempt to exert their greatest force. Without religion, this would be the state of every nation: nothing could make the laws to be revered but the most dreadful tortures. Tortures, which chill us with horror, have been *sometimes* inflicted on *atrocious* criminals. But if religion had not considerable power even over the generality of mankind, it would be necessary, and perhaps insufficient likewise, to inflict the most exquisite tortures on *every* criminal. Can any person be insensible, how valuable a blessing it is to society, that mild and moderate punishments are sufficient to preserve its peace? Need I explain the value of this blessing to any of the inhabitants of *Britain*, the happy land which has enjoyed it so long? Man-

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kind owe the blessing only to religion. Is it necessary to mention, that even a weak sense of religion secures the general practice of many duties, which could never be successfully enforced by human laws? What, except religion, can restrain men from secret crimes? Did not religion supply *an oath for confirmation* \* of human testimony, how little could testimony often be depended on? And if truth were not regarded as sacred, in how many instances would life, and property, and reputation, be precarious?

RELIGION has been often debased by the grossest corruptions, which have very much weakened its influence on mankind. But the greatest corruptions of religion could never totally destroy its power. A little truth, though almost stifled by the absurdest tenets, and the vilest superstitions, with which it was loaded, has, in some measure, displayed the power of religion to render men good members of society.

\* Heb. vi. 16.

Some depravations of religion have a very pernicious tendency. Innumerable mischiefs have arisen from them. But could we find, in any age, or in any region of the world, an example of a community destitute of all religion, we should soon be convinced, that the mischiefs of *irreligion* are incomparably greater, and more destructive to society, than all the bad effects which can be charged on *false* religion. We have frequent opportunity to observe the operation of superstition in multitudes. This excites our zeal against it, a zeal honest and laudable in itself. But being apt, like every other principle, to become excessive or irregular, it makes us often regard with too much indulgence, the far greater horrors of irreligion; which never prevails universally; and which acts, for the most part, in disguise, and with reserve, even among the few who give up themselves to its absolute sway. A long catalogue of the ill consequences of false religion may doubtless be produced; but could we set in opposition to it a complete enumeration of the benefits which society has actually derived



from very corrupt religions, we should find them more numerous and important than those which it derives from any other source.

RELIGION is exhibited in the gospel of Jesus, perfectly pure, separated from all corruptions and foreign mixtures. But its purity is debased by the imperfections which cleave to its professors in the present state; and it is but slightly embraced, and incompletely practised by them. On this account the Christian religion does not restrain and govern men so much as might be justly expected. It has really, notwithstanding, much greater influence on the generality, than is commonly imagined. We are accustomed to observe things going on in a certain course. By this means they become so familiar to us, that we never inquire from what causes they proceed. We see men submitting insensibly to many restraints, without which they could not live together in society. We seldom inquire, whence these restraints arise. But if they were traced to their origin, it would appear that  
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very many of them arise from religion.—

We are naturally disposed to fix a certain standard of every virtue that enters into a character, and to consider persons who fall much below this standard as wholly destitute of the virtue. We consider those alone as intitled to the character of piety, who are possessed of a greater regard to religion than the generality of mankind. We overlook the lower degrees of this regard, which are to be found in every breast. But many who have not a degree of piety sufficient for the eternal salvation of their own souls, have yet some regard to the restraints of religion, by which their behaviour in society is influenced. All men have some imperfect sense of religion, which renders them much fitter for the duties of society than they could be without it. A sense of religion, as it were, grows up with the human mind, and is, if I may use the expression, incorporated with it in its very growth. It mixes with our several operations unperceived, and often actuates our conduct, when we are insensible of its force. It establishes an habitual turn of mind, which, without our reflecting

reflecting on it, restrains us from many crimes hurtful to society, and predisposes us for submitting to those laws by which the happiness of the community is secured. Civil laws control only our external actions ; but the laws of religion kill the seeds of those principles, which, when they are cherished, spring up slowly and gradually into crimes. Civil laws regulate only that one species of conduct with respect to which they are professedly enacted ; but the laws of religion extend their influence to all our principles of action at once.

IF religion has in its very nature so great a tendency to strengthen all the ties of civil government, and if society does actually derive so great advantages from very corrupt religions, or from the imperfect regard to religion which even the generality of mankind have ; what happiness would not arise from the universal prevalence of that exalted piety which Christianity requires ? Were this true, unadulterated religion, heartily embraced, perfectly complied with, uniformly acted upon, it would render society happier



pier than we can easily imagine. Suppose the hearts of men possessed by those pious regards which are due to infinite perfection; suppose these regards animated by a lively sense of the manifold displays of infinite perfection in the system of nature; suppose them refined and elevated by a vigorous and habitual conception of our Saviour's stupendous and gracious undertaking for the salvation of mankind; suppose them raised to all that strength and firmness to which they may be raised by the influences of the spirit of grace, earnestly implored and carefully improved; suppose them continually cherished by the exercise of sincere devotion; suppose them to rule within, and to produce that character which they naturally tend to produce; would not the temper which they form, imply ingenuous reverence and fear of *the Most High*, more effectual to govern the conduct, than the slavish dread of any earthly ruler? Would not this temper imply nobler ambition than any that can arise from political distinctions, ambition to please and to resemble God? Would not this temper lead to purer and more solid

lid virtue, than can result from or be supported by the best-constituted form of government? How powerful would civil laws become, were their influence strengthened in every heart, by a steady regard to the laws, and to the judgment of the ruler of the world? Would not civil laws, indeed, be almost unnecessary? A temper of true Christian piety would restrain men effectually from every degree of all those crimes which disturb the peace, or obstruct the prosperity of a nation. If it were universally diffused, only necessary laws would be enacted, and every law would be cheerfully and constantly obeyed. Every individual would be solicitous to act his part in society in the best manner; the wisdom of all would be united in contriving, and the endeavours of all would be combined in executing every measure of public utility; all those virtues which contribute most to the happiness of society, cherished by piety, would flourish in absolute maturity. Accustomed as we are to the present degeneracy of the human race, it is not easy to stretch our imaginations so far, as to form an idea  
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of the prosperity of a nation, in which *the people were all righteous* \*, in which virtue directed and added force to the united power of the whole community; which, secure from every internal evil, were regarded with awe and reverence by nations more corrupted, and consequently weaker. But were Christian piety universally practised in any nation, that nation would experience in its infallible consequences, this high prosperity, which is, at present, even inconceivable: and the favour of God, who *loveth righteousness, and hateth iniquity* †, would bestow higher prosperity on that nation, than all which could result from the natural consequences of their own piety.

I HOPE it is evident from what has been said, that piety contributes greatly to the public happiness of every nation. Let us *next* show briefly, what influence the consideration of this ought to have on all ranks of men.

\* II. lx. 21.

† Psal. xi. 7. v. 5.



IN every nation there are many of superior and distinguished rank. The higher the rank which persons hold, the greater will be the importance, the more extensive the influence of their behaviour in society. Any neglect of duty in them is more pernicious to their country, than a similar neglect in persons of inferior rank. Since religion, therefore, most effectually regulates the conduct of every citizen, how necessary is it to the happiness of a nation, that the great be entirely subject to the influence of religion? Your country calls upon you, ye great, ye noble, for her sake; she beseeches you, for the happiness which *your* right behaviour especially will confer on her, to excel in piety, that it may, like a living spirit, animate you continually in *seeking her good* \*. — Your piety will tend to make others, as well as yourselves, good citizens. They who have been least disposed to regard religion themselves, have nevertheless acknowledged the necessity of cherishing religious impressions in the generality. The exam-

\* Psal. cxxii. 9.

ple of the higher ranks will cherish them most successfully. Should their practice shew that they regard religion with indifference, mankind, always eager to imitate their superiors, will soon endeavour to free themselves from the restraints which religion lays upon their vices. Piety consists chiefly in an inward temper. It is a false appearance of it that studiously displays itself in external show. But inward piety is naturally expressed in unaffected devotion, and regular worship of God. It is only by being thus expressed, that it becomes obvious to others, or can attract their imitation. If we would render others pious by our good example, we must put forth piety into act on every proper occasion. But the example of piety will be most attractive, when it is exhibited by those whom Divine Providence has placed in an eminent rank. In their conduct piety will shine with the greatest lustre. When they render their regard to God conspicuous and unquestionable, the rest of mankind will be insensibly allured to the practice of religion. It is the privilege of those who are exalted above the

many, that they have it in their power to recommend every virtue to mankind, by their example ; a noble privilege, which they are strictly obliged to exercise. And can the obligation be stronger with regard to any virtue, than with regard to piety, which is most excellent in itself, and most beneficial to human society ?

AGAIN, because piety has the strongest tendency to promote the happiness of every people, it is particularly incumbent on all who are intrusted with any degree of authority and power, on all governors, judges, and magistrates, to exercise and to encourage unfeigned and exalted piety. Many of the rulers of every kingdom are naturally of superior rank, and all of them derive importance from their public character. This will give force and influence to their example.—Rulers are the proper guardians of the peace and order of society. It is chiefly religion that supports those connections of individuals, which bestow order on society, which distinguish a regular polity from a confused multitude, and which produce  
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public peace, prosperity, and power. On this account, all rulers are, by their office, in a peculiar manner, the guardians of religion. They cannot exert themselves in this character, if they be either indifferent about religion, or averse from it. Without a warm regard to religion prevailing in their own hearts, they will not employ their authority in promoting it. If, therefore, any ruler neglect the duties, or transgress the laws of piety, he unworthily betrays the highest interests of society, with the protection of which he is intrusted. His practice tends, indirectly perhaps, but certainly, to multiply those crimes which it is his business to correct ; it tends to introduce those disorders into society which his office is instituted on purpose to prevent.—It is of the highest moment to society, that the public functions of rulers be well executed. Rulers are less subject than others to the restraints which arise from human laws. They can execute the laws against others ; but themselves have many advantages for eluding the force of the laws, from their rank, their authority, and power. The laws  
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of religion alone, regarded and complied with, can sufficiently control their actions. In those monstrous governments themselves, where the power of rulers is absolute, the laws even of false and corrupt religions lay some restraint on the will of the rulers, and induce them to act, in many instances, with moderation. What happiness, then, might not be derived to mankind from their governors, if, in better constitutions of government, a purer religion united its restraints with those under which the civil laws lay the highest rulers? — Power is apt to be abused, and to produce insolence and severity. The benign spirit of Christian piety, thoroughly imbibed by rulers, is the most effectual preservative from the abuse of power. Religion will beget in the mighty ones of the earth a sense of dependence on *the Most High*, whose children and subjects all men are; and this sense will be a powerful principle of justice, gentleness, and clemency to all whom God hath subjected to their power. Religion will lead them to consider their power as derived from the gracious and  
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righteous governor of the world ; and to exercise it uniformly for the good of all, according to the example of righteousness and benignity which God exhibits in his providence towards his creatures. The universal prevalence of Christian piety would have force enough to banish from the earth the cruel slavery under which a great part of mankind groan at present. In fact, wherever Christianity has been embraced, it has prevented many of the horrors of lawless despotism, and introduced some degree of moderation into the spirit of government. Governors, animated by its genuine power, will ever be *the ministers of God to men for good* \*. *Be wise now therefore, O ye kings : be instructed, ye judges of the earth : serve the Lord with fear* †. *Give unto the Lord, O ye mighty, give unto the Lord glory and strength. Give unto the Lord the glory due unto his name ; worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness* ‡.

FURTHER, the consideration of that in-

\* Rom. xiii. 4.

† Psal. ii. 10. 11.

‡ Psal. xxix. 1. 2.

fluence



fluence which piety has upon the public happiness, ought to add strength to the endeavours of all the ministers of Jesus, for cherishing the benign and heavenly spirit of religion in the hearts of men. We are bound by the strongest ties, my Reverend Fathers and Brethren, we are urged by all possible considerations, to promote universal and sincere regard to God, whose ministers, for this very end, we are. Should our country find any of *us* defective in piety, that virtue which is rendered peculiarly incumbent upon us by the relation in which we stand to the all-perfect object of it; should our country have reason to impute any of the mischiefs which she cannot fail to suffer from the impiety of her sons, to our indifference about religion; O let us think, what indignation may she not justly pour out on us, as the most undutiful and abandoned of her children; as wretches, who cannot be restrained by considerations, most sacred to all, but to us more sacred than to any others, from being traitors to her most important interests! True piety is to every nation, like the sun to this earth;

earth ; it alone can enlighten, warm, cheerish, or invigorate all its inhabitants. But in the present age, the influences of this glorious luminary are often obstructed, often infected. The impious, as if they dwelt in some frozen clime, feel none of its force ; the dark clouds of superstition intercept its rays from others ; enthusiasm, like a flashing meteor, confounds its light, and converts its genial warmth into unnatural, sultry, and suffocating heat. To the ministers of religion is committed the important office of conducting all, as it were, into a happy region, and placing them in a favourable situation, where the beams of religion, unobstructed, pure, and intense, may penetrate their hearts. Would we promote the happiness of men, either in this world or in the next, let us do our utmost to lay their souls open to the influences of piety, and to prepare them for receiving them. Be it our constant care to present to the view of our hearers true piety, and serious devotion, in its genuine form, neither tainted by enthusiasm, nor debased by superstition ; let us labour to express the secret operation of

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devout affections in the heart; let us display their beauty and their power, in all the exercises of fervent devotion; let us dwell often on the view of divine excellence, especially as it is manifested in the Christian dispensation, that men may feel what regards are due to it, that they may perceive the base degeneracy of that soul which cannot be affected by it; let us endeavour to excite their love to godliness, by representing, as far as words can represent, the charms of a temper of devotion, its refined and exquisite pleasures, and its happy consequences; let us use all the means we can, to form men to the taste, and to win them to the pursuit of that real dignity of character, which piety alone can bestow; let piety especially shine forth pure, fervent, and exalted in our own example. By aiming continually at all this, we shall best perform our duty, not only to God, and to our own souls, but also to our country. If our endeavours prove successful, by our means *peace shall be within her walls, and prosperity within her palaces* \*: for the

\* Psal. cxxii. 7.



favour of God shall rest upon her; her children shall call us blessed among men; and we shall *see her good*, we shall *rejoice in the gladness of our nation*, and *glory with the Lord's inheritance* \*.

FINALLY, let us all, whatever be our rank or station, *fear the Lord always, for our good*. The enemies of religion impudently boast, that their enlarged views have enabled them to provide for the *present* happiness of the world, by setting men free from the uneasy apprehensions of a God and a future state. But it may be affirmed with greater truth, that by checking all regard to that great being who alone can bestow *eternal* happiness, they, at the same time, with surprising narrowness of thought, destroy the only foundation of *present* peace and happiness, both to individuals and to societies. Let us, my Christian brethren, ever regard their attempts with indignation. In spite of all the sophistry, and all the ridicule, by which they would destroy a firm

\* Psal. cvi. 5.

faith, and lively sense of God ; by which they would discourage the fervent exercise of devout affections ; by which they would overturn our belief of the gospel of Christ, the firmest support, the highest improvement of genuine piety ; let us be persuaded, that *to fear the Lord will always be our righteousness* \*. We are all members of society ; we are all obliged to promote its peace and happiness ; an argument drawn from its interest ought to be irresistible to us all : let us, therefore, practise piety, which is the principal bond of social union. We are obliged to piety, not only as we are men and Christians, but also as we are citizens ; it is a duty which each of us owes to his country. If we be truly pious, we shall, at least, render *ourselves* fitter for acting our part well : we shall likewise contribute to render *others* more useful subjects. None of us is so obscure, as to be wholly incapable of promoting religion by an example of regard to it. Princes may recommend religion powerfully by their authority and example :

\* Deut. vi. 25.

our pious King is solicitous to recommend it. They who have laboured in forming his young heart to piety, have influence enough to give extensive encouragement to this divine virtue; we trust they will give it. But the meanest of us may assist their noble efforts; the meanest of us may be religious; the meanest of us may show an attractive, living form of piety. We cannot all serve our country, by contriving or executing great designs; but we may all serve it effectually by being pious. If we be acted uniformly by piety, our low station may prevent our being celebrated as patriots in the annals of men; but we shall be inrolled patriots in the records of heaven; for we shall perform the most important duty to our country which any man can perform. *Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord\**. He will always be the God of a religious and virtuous nation. *Let all the earth, therefore, fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him†.*

\* Psal. xxxiii. 12.

† Verse 8.

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— The year 1717

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